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SEX EDUCATION OF THE CHILD: HOW THE NURSE MAY HELP

BY CHRISTINE R. KEFAUVER, R.N.

*Acting Supervisor, Industrial Hygiene, Department of Health,
New York City*

Whether we go into the homes of the people in the capacity of private nurse to the rich, or as a district visiting nurse to the poor and the middle class, it will be only a short time, if we are the right sort of nurses, before the harrassed mother begins to present for our consideration and help the problems of her daily life. Chief among these is her share in the education of her children.

She is especially conscious of the need of some sort of sex education and of her unfitness to give it. The modern woman no longer accepts the platitude that ignorance is innocence. On the contrary, she is aware that it is the greatest kind of danger to the young, especially to young girls. Unfortunately, her own previous training, her environment, perhaps her church affiliations, and her limited opportunity for reading, have not fitted her to supply this instruction to her children. She is distrustful of delegating this important task to the school, realizing that the average unmarried teacher is even less fitted than herself to instruct the child in the great mysteries of life and reproduction. Yet the life of modern children is so crowded with highly exciting events—"movies," theatres, automobiles, and a thousand others undreamed of twenty-five years ago, that it is but natural that they should receive many impressions which are too complicated for their understanding. Because of the wrong interpretation which the child in his ignorance puts upon what he sees and hears, they may be distinctly harmful to him. This is especially true in regard to matters touching upon sex. If, as is our present practice, we entirely neglect to give the adolescent and pre-adolescent child any proper instruction in matters of sex, it is possible that when this subject is brought to his attention it may cause more or less of a shock and for a time at least unduly focus his attention upon this new and unexplained phase of existence. If the child is further unfortunate in lacking the confidence of an intelligent parent or some other good adult to whom he may go for information, the danger is greatly increased. This is especially true in the highly complex structure of our modern society. If, in addition, the giving of this information is delayed until the deep underlying instincts of sex begin to awaken at the age of puberty, making their insistent and misunderstood

demands upon nature and self-control, the difficulty is increased a hundredfold.

One of the first questions, then, which the anxious mother propounds to the nurse is, "At what time should I begin to give my children instruction in sex?" The answer depends entirely upon the individual child, but as a general rule it may be stated that when the child first begins to ask questions, regardless of how young he may be when this occurs, he is old enough to have these questions answered. Furthermore, the questions should be answered fully enough to satisfy him and in such a way that he will be able to understand. Except in rare cases where the child does not ask questions at all, information should not be volunteered; it is better, if necessary, to stimulate the child to ask questions. However, this is rarely necessary as it is an unusual case where the child, filled with the excitement of a neighbor's new baby, does not overwhelm its mother with anxious queries. Under no circumstances should the mother at this time put off the child with any of the timeworn lies. No child not feeble-minded is fool enough to believe that the baby came in the doctor's satchel or that the stork left it on the window-sill; or if he did, he would soon be disillusioned by his companions.

On the contrary, the child should be taught that all life emanates from God and that all His works are beautiful and to be admired. If he has already received wrong impressions of sex and has been led to believe that reproduction is in some way vile, he should be taught that nothing in God's plan is unclean, except as vile people make it so.

The mother should begin by teaching the child the proper names of all parts of his body, stressing no more the generative organs than she would the eyes or hands, and emphasizing alike the need for the care of all of them. In other words, he should respect his body and should be taught why any form of self abuse, whether it is neglect of personal cleanliness or the practice of immoral habits, is an affront to nature and an injury to himself. Real modesty, not false prudery, should be inculcated.

To quote Dr. John Stokes, in his book on *The Third Great Plague*:

The child who does not learn to respect his body in the act of brushing his teeth and taking his bath and exercises, and whose thought and speech and temper are unbridled by any self-restraint, will give little heed when told not to abuse his manhood by exposing himself to filth. The time to control the future of the sexual diseases is in the toddler at the knee, the child whose daily lesson in self-control will culminate when he says the final "No" to his passions as a man. Prevention of syphilis by sexual self-control is the expression of a lifelong habit of self-discipline, bred in the bone from childhood, *not merely painted on the surface at puberty*.

Unfortunately the rules which apply to one child are not applicable

to another and it is because the mother is in the best position to judge the needs and personal peculiarities of her children that she is the ideal person to give them instruction on this vital subject. There are many excellent books, very reasonably priced, which will help her greatly in this regard. One of the very best and simplest of these is "What Every Mother Should Know," by Margaret H. Sanger.

It is especially necessary that the mother should have the confidence of her children at the trying age of puberty. The first sign of development (the appearance of hair on the body, or development of the bust) should be a signal for her to discuss in the most natural way, and as though it were quite an ordinary matter, the change which is about to take place in her boy or girl. The child should be made to realize that this development is a very wonderful and beautiful part of its life and upon the care of its person at this time, proper diet and exercise, sufficient rest and suitable companions, depends the happiness of its whole future life.

The mother should especially acquaint herself with the meaning of puberty in the boy, its manifestations and dangers. She should not hesitate to discuss these matters freely with him, to counteract the vicious influence of evil or ignorant companions, who prattle of sex necessity and suchlike pernicious superstitions. Under no circumstances should she leave this delicate task solely to the father. Throughout his life the boy will receive the male point of view on this subject; this is his only opportunity to get the viewpoint of a good woman.

Especially should the mother hold the confidence of her daughter. Without appearing obtrusive, she should know her daughter's companions, should inform herself of their family connections, social and business activities. She should never permit her daughter to go to places of amusement in the sole company of boys or men without the presence of an older woman. On the other hand, this care should not assume the status of espionage or become in any way irksome or it will defeat its purpose.

The home should be made the center of attraction and the children, boys and girls, urged to bring their friends to the home rather than to meet outside of it. The girl should be taught to look forward to marriage and maternity as something right, beautiful, and desirable and her responsibilities should be emphasized. Under no circumstances should the vicious idea be fostered that sex instinct is wrong and degrading in a woman, and merely a survival of the brute in man, whose satisfaction is sanctioned by law. The existence of this vicious teaching is responsible for two-thirds of all marital unhappiness.

The relation of over-feeding, as well as bodily uncleanliness, to masturbation should be explained to the mother of young children. Above all things she should be instructed in the danger of permitting children to sleep in the room, to say nothing of the same bed, with herself and her husband, and under no circumstances should children of opposite sexes, even though they be very young, be permitted to sleep together.

All this, of course, applies to the English speaking mother. With the foreigner the problem is more complicated, especially in certain races, by reason of inherited prejudices, religion, and other factors. Even in these cases the nurse who can speak to them in their own language can do much to break down this and give the American viewpoint. In cases where this is not possible, the school of the future will be compelled to take a hand, if the social problem is not to engulf us.

All this and much more the nurse can teach in her daily visits to the homes, and the result in a healthier and happier generation will be the fruit of her labors, even though this harvesting may come after she has passed on.

STUDENT LIFE AT TEACHERS COLLEGE

BY MARY M. ROBERTS, R.N.

Splendid though the faculty is, it is by no means the only asset of Teachers College! What could be more interesting than to compare notes and discuss your pet theories with nurses from all the quarters of the earth? Whether you are working for a diploma as "Director and Instructor in Public Health Nursing," "Superintendent and Principal of Training School," "Instructor and Supervisor in Schools of Nursing," "Supervisor of Public Health Nursing," or as "Public Health Nurse," you are sure to find, in your own small group, people whose opinions, through richness of experience, carry weight. Indeed, some of the liveliest discussions are those that occur outside the class room.

Consider a group of administrators discussing some adjustment of the curriculum, each one biased by her own experience and quite sure that "where I come from it is different," but none the less enlarging her outlook by the discussion. One such group was made up of Sisters from some of our representative Catholic schools, missionary nurses preparing to return to their comparatively young schools in China and India, students from the Philippines preparing to take